

RYAN LEE

RYAN LEE GALLERY LLC
515 WEST 26TH STREET
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Emma Amos

Bathers

September 10 – October 24, 2026

Opening reception: Thursday, September 10, 2026, 6:00-8:00 pm

RYAN LEE Gallery is pleased to announce *Bathers*, showcasing five paintings and seventeen works on paper by Emma Amos (b. 1937 Atlanta, GA - d. 2020 Bedford, NH) that depict Black figures bathing and swimming, created between 1966 and 2009. This is a subject that the artist explored and revisited in every decade of her career.

The artist depicted people – mostly women – swimming, lounging, and sometimes doing nothing at all. Amos said, “These pictures represent freedom to me, a definite letting go.” Amos’s color palette, ranging from tawny browns to sun-soaked orange and watery blue, accentuates the feeling of ease and contentment in so many of these works.

The earliest work in the show is *Two Standing Women* (1966), in which the women gaze directly at the viewer with confidence and poise. Exhibited here for the first time together is an extraordinary series of aquatints made from 1975-1980 that depict women at rest solo or paired in a group – assured, beautiful and powerful in bathing suits. *Gold Coast* (2008) is one of the latest works in the show and is being exhibited for the first time. Bordered by African fabric, its central figure strikes a jubilant pose under her colorful umbrella.

Amos couldn’t swim, but she loved spending time near the water. As a child, Amos enjoyed time at the segregated Washington Park Pool in her home city of Atlanta, Georgia. Images of Black joy and leisure resonate amidst the long American history of segregation and discrimination that led to “separate but equal” pools and beaches. Amos was all too aware of the racialized implications of Black people in water, noting that “so many of us Black women never enjoyed water because as children we feared unleashing the terrible mass of tangled hair that would break combs and bring tears to our eyes.”

The bather was a recurring theme throughout the history of art – painted by artists from Titian to Cézanne – but images of Black bathers were less commonly portrayed. Building on Amos’s work, contemporary artists such as Derrick Adams and Amy Sherald have explored the topic in recent years.

The exhibition is accompanied by a catalog with an essay by Dr. Adrienne Childs.

Emma Amos (b. 1937 Atlanta, GA - d. 2020 Bedford, NH) was a pioneering artist, educator, and activist. A dynamic painter and masterful colorist, her commitment to interrogating the art-historical status quo yielded a body of vibrant and intellectually rigorous work. Influenced by modern Western European art, Abstract Expressionism, the civil rights movement and feminism, Amos was drawn to exploring the politics of culture and issues of racism, sexism, and ethnocentrism in her art. “It’s always been my contention,” Amos once said, “that for me, a Black woman artist, to walk into the studio is a political act.”

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Showcasing the museum's recent acquisition of Amos's monumental portrait series *The Gift* (1990–94), *The Gift: Emma Amos with Friends* opens in September 2026 at the Cleveland Museum of Art. Amos is included in *Get in the Game: Sports and Contemporary Culture*, which opened at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 2024, traveled to Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, and is now on view at the Pérez Art Museum Miami. In 2024, Amos was included in the Whitney Museum of American Art's *Edges of Ailey*. In 2021, *Emma Amos: Color Odyssey*, a landmark retrospective of the artist's career, traveled from the Georgia Museum of Art to the Munson Museum, NY and Philadelphia Museum of Art, PA. She has also been included in exhibitions at the Brooklyn Museum, NY (2024); SFMOMA, CA (2024); Hudson River Museum, NY (2024); Saint Louis Art Museum, MO (2024); Honolulu Museum of Art, HI (2024); British Museum, UK (2023); Blanton Museum of Art, TX (2023); Pinacoteca de São Paulo, Brazil (2022); Modern Art Museum at Fort Worth, TX (2022); Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA (2019); Minneapolis Institute of Art, MN (2019); National Portrait Gallery, UK (2018); de Young Museum, CA (2017); Whitney Museum of American Art (2017); Tate Modern, UK (2017); and Musée du Quai Branly, France (2016), among others.

Her work is held in over 40 museum collections, including the Art Institute of Chicago, IL; Baltimore Museum of Art, MD; Bass Museum of Art, FL; Birmingham Museum of Art, AL; British Museum, UK; Brooklyn Museum, NY; Detroit Institute of Arts, MI; James F. Byrnes Institute, Germany; Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY; Minneapolis Institute of Art, MN; Munson, NY; Museo de las Artes, Mexico; Museum of Modern Art, NY; National Gallery of Art, DC; Newark Museum, NJ; Studio Museum in Harlem, NY; Whitney Museum of American Art, NY; and Yale University Art Gallery, CT, among others.